

# Fixing America's Cold Case Crisis

By James M. Adcock | November 28, 2018



Photo of crime scene mural by Tom Hilton via Flickr

As each year passes, we are adding thousands of unresolved homicides to the nation's cold case dilemma.

According to the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports and the Murder Accountability Project (which uses the same FBI Crime Reports data), the U.S. has accumulated over 248,933 unsolved murders since 1980.

This number is bound to grow—and it should worry Americans. Even if only a fraction of those unsolved murders mean that guilty individuals are still walking the streets and capable of killing again, it represents a persistent threat to public safety.

To make matters worse, recent studies (<http://www.investigativesciencesjournal.org/article/view/17644/11423>) have determined that only about 18 percent of the nation's 18,000-plus police agencies that have cold cases actually have a "cold case unit" to investigate these incidents. And about 20 percent of those units do not have proper protocols in place to guide them through the process in the most effective way.

But there is a path forward.

A National Best Practices Guide prepared by the National Institute of Justice (<https://www.nij.gov/Pages/welcome.aspx>) (NIJ) is expected to be ready early next year, with recommendations on how to implement and sustain a cold case investigation unit within police departments. This document explicitly declares that we are in a "Cold Case Crisis" that needs our immediate attention.

To get a sense of the size of the crisis, please see the [accompanying table](https://thecrimereport.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/coldcase-table.pdf), (https://thecrimereport.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/coldcase-table.pdf) which covers the 23 cities who reported over 100 homicides during 2017.

*SOURCE FOR TABLE: The [Murder Accountability Project](http://www.murderdata.org/) (http://www.murderdata.org/) which uses FBI Crime Data. Population figures were obtained from the US Census Bureau.*

The cities are ranked based on the rate of homicides per 100,000 population. The higher the number, the more severe the problem; but the national average was 5.4 per 100,000.

Following the rate are the number of homicides each city solved that year with their percentages. The average solved percentage for 2017 was 61.6 percent.

The last column reflects the total number of cold-case unresolved homicides each city accumulated since 1980.

Note that complete data is missing from two of the country's biggest cities: Chicago and New York. That's because in multiple years they did not report clearance/solve data to the FBI; therefore an accurate evaluation could not be made for those categories.

Only eight of these cities (New York, Las Vegas, Dallas, Milwaukee, Los Angeles, San Antonio, Washington DC, and Nashville) had a solve percentage above the national average. Fifteen were below the average, which is indicative of an issue that needs our attention as well.

In 2016, the national clearance was [59.4 percent](https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2016/crime-in-the-u.s.-2016/topic-pages/clearances) (https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2016/crime-in-the-u.s.-2016/topic-pages/clearances), the lowest since records were kept.

That means roughly four out of every 10 homicides are unsolved.

You should ask: What is your city doing about this?

The light at the end of the tunnel could be the upcoming NIJ Best Practices Guide. It is the culmination of ideas, research and concepts considered during several meetings from a national group of cold case experts assembled through the NIJ Cold Case Working Group to formulate a workable guide. I was a member of this group.

Although the document is still awaiting official release, I'm able to highlight some of the conclusions that I consider to be the keys to solving our Cold Case crisis.

First, the problem: Today's law enforcement is oriented towards the present and the future with little attention given to the past, in spite of the fact that thousands of families are living without answers, and justice is not being properly served.

If you were to ask police officials in one of cities listed in the table, "How many cold case homicides do you have?" I wager that they either do not know, or the figure they provide will be far below the numbers I have provided.

Not knowing increases the odds that the problem will get worse over time.

*The biggest obstacles to solving cold cases are police commitment, manpower and funds.*

The biggest obstacles facing police departments today concerning the investigation of cold cases are commitment, manpower and funds.

A critical start to addressing the problem is a taking a simple inventory of all unresolved cases. This will serve as a baseline to work from, for the present and the future.

But using that baseline requires commitment, and that requires a "dedicated" cold case unit where the detectives are full time, only investigate cold cases, and are not pulled into other investigations. Just having part-time detectives is better than nothing, but it is like placing a band aid on a gushing wound.

Inadequate manpower is the next hurdle.

Detectives already spend about 60 percent of their time accomplishing administrative functions on the job. Cold case investigations, especially during the early stages of organizing case files, which involves reviewing them and analyzing their prospects of being solved, will significantly raise that percentage.

To address this problem, agencies could consider utilizing vetted outside sources such as retired police officers, professors, grad students and other business people to conduct the mundane administrative tasks associated with this process.

This would allow the full-time detectives to spend more time investigating. For example, Charlotte, NC has nine unpaid volunteers. That has helped the local police achieve a clearance/solve percentage for 2017 of 90 percent. Their average of 73 percent over the period since 2004 is far above many cities of their size.

Then there's the money question.

Non-profits (such as mine, the [Mid-South Cold Case Initiative](https://www.ms-coldcaseinitiative.com/) (<https://www.ms-coldcaseinitiative.com/>)), along with other organizations in our community, could easily donate funds earmarked for cold case investigations, and therefore help to lessen the burden on the police department.

Charlotte, for example, has received private funding support from local community sources. There's no reason why other cities cannot do the same.

But the real key to overcoming the hurdles is political momentum. And that requires pressure from local citizens and community leaders who understand how high the stakes are.

Unless that happens, our national cold-case crisis is likely to geometrically worsen.

**See also: “Murder on Hold: Rural Cops Need Help to Solve Rising Cold Case Backlogs** (<https://thecrimereport.org/2017/05/25/murder-on-hold-rural-cops-need-help-to-solve-their-cold-case-backlogs/>).”

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